

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: August 10, 2017

Agenda Item: Mt. Silcox Wildlife Management Area Forest Habitat Project

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 Min

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Background

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to conduct a forest habitat enhancement project on 92 acres of the Mount Silcox Wildlife Management Area (MSWMA). This project would implement a combination of treatments including timber harvest, hand thinning, and broadcast burning in conifer and aspen/mixed-conifer forest and road maintenance on four miles of existing road. Post-harvest hazard reduction would be accomplished through piling and burning slash and spot herbicide treatments along roads, log landings, and disturbed areas would occur for up to three years. The proposed project would improve aspen habitats; enhance or create openings in the forest canopy to increase bunchgrass and woody browse production; promote development of diverse, multi-story stand structure favored by sensitive species including Cassin's finch, Clark's nutcracker, Evening grosbeak, Lewis's woodpecker, Pileated woodpecker, and Varied thrush; and implement forestry treatments that mimic ecological processes, promote development of ecologically site-appropriate habitat conditions, and reduce the susceptibility of forests to uncharacteristic disturbance events (such as stand replacement fires and bark beetle epidemics). FWP would begin implementation of this project in the fall of 2017 through the summer of 2020. This project would also support the statutory requirements of MCA 87-1-622 to "address fire mitigation, pine beetle infestation, and wildlife enhancement..."

Public Involvement Process & Results

FWP released the draft environmental assessment for public review on June 5 and accepted public comment through July 5. FWP received two comments in support and none in opposition of the proposed project.

Alternatives and Analysis

No action would result in perpetuating the current condition and, barring the occurrence of a natural disturbance event, forests would continue to grow and expand in predictable successional pathways, including conifers shading out aspen, bunchgrasses, and important woody browse. Stand structure and species composition is expected to become more homogenous and simplified (increase in single-story, closed canopy forests with less diverse understory) resulting in a long-term decline in biodiversity and habitat availability for a number of sensitive species.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends implementing the proposed forest habitat project based on the demonstrated need to improve aspen, enhance forage production for big game, favor development of productive wildlife habitat for a variety of endemic and sensitive species, and reduce the susceptibility of forests to uncharacteristic disturbance events.

Proposed Motion

I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve the proposed forest habitat project on Mount Silcox Wildlife Management Area as presented by FWP.